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SUBJECT: GOC REACTS CALMLY TO MASSACRE IN VENEZUELA, BUT WORRIES  
ABOUT CHAVEZ'S INTENTIONS

REF: CARACAS 1376; STATE 111966; 06 BOGOTA 3764

CLASSIFIED BY: Mark Wells, Political Counselor; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C/NF) The GOC has little information on the apparent massacre of nine Colombians (along with one Peruvian and one Venezuelan) whose bodies were discovered on October 24 in the Venezuelan state of Tachira. GOC officials say the GBRV has shared little and has paid no heed to Colombian offers of assistance, which has made it impossible to figure out who committed the atrocity. Still, the GOC is less concerned with the crime itself than with Chavez's attempts to exploit it politically—which Colombian officials see as part of a Chavez plan to escalate bilateral tensions in the wake of the October 30 signing of the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement. MFA officials confided that they fear Chavez will use his "Alo Presidente" show on November 1 to break relations with Colombia. The GOC is trying to keep an even keel in this latest bilateral dispute, hoping measured responses can lower the temperature and win international support. End Summary.

GOC STILL IN THE DARK ON MASSACRE...

¶2. (C/NF) Ambassador Carlos Morales, MFA Acting Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, told us on October 29 that the GOC was making little headway in its investigation of the apparent massacre of nine Colombian citizens in Tachira state in Venezuela in late October. (Note: Per Ref A, one Peruvian and one Venezuelan were apparently killed in the same attack; the sole survivor, Colombian Manuel Junior Cortes, is in a Caracas military hospital. End Note). Morales noted with frustration that the GBRV was not sharing information with the GOC and had rebuffed GOC offers to assist in the investigation. He added the GOC was "conferring" internally to make sure the victims had no connection to any GOC agencies.

¶3. (C/NF) Morales contended the GBRV's lack of responsiveness made it impossible to analyze the competing hypotheses about who had killed the men. According to the Colombian press, Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez insinuated the Colombians were "paramilitaries" the GOC had sent to infiltrate Venezuela. On the other hand, Tachira Secretary of Government Leomagno Flores (a frequent Chavez critic, according to press) told reporters he believed Venezuela-based members of Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgency had killed the youths.

¶4. (C/NF) Morales opined that the ELN was probably responsible, though he could not offer a motive. He speculated-emphasizing this was conjecture-that the victims may actually have been working in Venezuela as street vendors, but had been recruited by a Colombian illegal armed group operating in Venezuela, and that the ELN had killed them as a result. Regardless of motive, he said, it was clear the GBRV was to blame for allowing Colombian armed groups to operate in its territory.

... BUT WORRIED ABOUT CHAVEZ'S MOTIVES

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¶5. (C/NF) The GOC is less concerned with the crime itself than with Chavez's attempts to exploit it politically, according to Morales. The MFA sees the GBRV's accusations and stonewalling as part of an overall Chavez diplomatic offensive to ratchet up bilateral

tensions the same week the GOC and USG signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA - ref B). Morales pointed out what he called the GBRV's "grandstanding" on two alleged Colombian Administrative Department of Security (DAS) agents arrested in Venezuela this month as further evidence of this plan (Note: DAS Director Felipe Munoz publicly denied the two were DAS employees, and Acting Prosecutor General Guillermo Mendoza announced an investigation into how the GBRV managed to obtain classified Colombian intelligence documents, according to press. End Note). MFA officials confided to us at the DCA signing ceremony that they fear Chavez will use his "Alo Presidente" show on November 1 to formally break relations with Colombia.

¶6. (C/NF) Morales argued that Chavez was trying to provoke a knee-jerk reaction from the GOC and to isolate Colombia diplomatically in the region. He noted the GOC's close relations with the United States, and the DCA in particular, had cost Colombia both in terms of decreased trade with Venezuela and worse diplomatic relations in the region. Thus, he said, the GOC is committed to prudent reactions, hoping such measured responses can keep the spat from escalating and prevent Chavez from capitalizing on the incidents internationally. Still, he concluded, the GOC's exterior calm masks deep-seated worries

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